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ABSTRACT

The speech communications professionals who are involved in training and consulting need to conceptualize and talk about their activities as communication educators--not as trainers. Clients should be taught to make interpretive choices appropriate to their rhetorical environment, in addition to learning basic skills. As educators in the corporate setting, speech professionals deal with the needs of two audiences--corporate representatives who want "competent communicators" as new hires, and employees in the business setting who want to know how to "communicate well," and how to accomplish personal and professional goals. A workshop can be used to focus on the function of rhetorical choices in the organizational setting. Participants should be involved not just in analyzing their own situations but also those brought to the workshop by others from the same organization. It is the speech professional's task to create a situation where clients are taught how to discover the questions to ask that will enable them to find the alternative communication behaviors available to them. By focusing on participants' rhetorical needs and rhetorical environments, the educator helps them apply performance skills in more flexible ways and in ways that are transferable to other situations. A highly participatory workshop prepares those in the corporate world to respond to the organization as a dynamic environment. (NKA)

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Rhetorical Types and "Training"

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Individuals doing training and consulting face severe stereotypes, both within and outside our own professional circles. We are often cast pejoratively by our academic colleagues as modern day sophists, selling our expertise (and, one might construe, our souls) in pursuit of the demon mammon. Many of us have heard rebukes remarkably like those fired by Plato: that we teach mere flattery, or how to manipulate, or the art of deception. In an ironic twist from Plato's charges, we may be told that we demean the field of rhetoric by teaching mere skills (read "knack," like "cookery").[1] I would wager that most of us who have confessed to being involved in training or consulting have been personally privy to such helpful descriptions of our work by colleagues in the field. Perhaps we have wondered if the criticisms fit.

On the other hand, who among us has not moaned in discouraged tone when faced with the misconception that all we provide in our departments are "service" courses? To many, "Speech" = "performance" = "skills." Speech is seen as an atheoretical endeavor concerned only with performance, not as a discipline. In many colleges and universities those in Speech departments struggle for credibility as a discipline, to be seen as academicians pursuing valid theoretical interests. We want it known that we are have more to offer a school and to the world than teaching students to be public speakers.

Is it any wonder, then, that there should be a concern about Speech professionals who consult or conduct training, if that work is thought to be divorced from scholarly endeavors or purely training in rote skills? Advertising flyers abound for communications courses that reinforce such a view. For example, one advertisement proclaims that you can "Fine-tune your MOST IMPORTANT business skill . . . inexpensively" by buying a magazine subscription which gives "tips," "techniques," and lets

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[1] For example, Plato's descriptions of rhetoric as a sophistic endeavor as transcribed in the Gorgias.

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the reader in on "the secrets of the pros."[2] One of the many flyers I've received promised that if attendees "Listen to [the seminar leader]" each would "become an effective speaker, WITHOUT HAVING TO SAY A WORD!"

Our credibility is on the line. Our collective identity is affected by those who call themselves communication consultants. What we as trainers and consultants do--and what we say we do--matters not just to our clients, but to our colleagues as well.

This has been a long introduction, but I think it is important to have a specific context for talking about the kind of communication education I think we ought to be doing. It is my contention that we need to conceptualize and to talk about our activities as communication educators, not as trainers. When acting as educators in the corporate world we should be doing far more than the words "skills training" imply.[3] When one looks at what we actually do, we are not simply laying out a set of communication behaviors and then drilling people in their use. We first teach clients about their interpretive choices. We do this because we know that only then will they be able to make the behavioral choices appropriate to their rhetorical environment. We need to talk about ourselves and about what we do in a way that reflects this scholarly expertise. The speech-communication educator in the corporation is essentially a rhetorical critic, a scholar applying critical skills to the organizational and rhetorical lives of his or her clients. Our role as rhetorical critic is crucial to what we do.

In this paper I will discuss some of the implications of taking a rhetorical critical approach to communication education in the corporation. I will first talk about the need for communication education in the corporate setting, and then I will attempt to show what I mean by "education" (as opposed to "training") with examples drawn from workshops focusing on presentational speaking and on interpersonal communication.

There is a need in the corporate world for what we have to offer. Increasingly, corporate representatives express a desire for "competent communicators" in their organizations. The ability to communicate, especially orally, consistently appears at the top of the list of requisite attributes of new hires.[4]

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[2] From an advertising flyer for the Decker Communications Report.

[3] It is interesting to note that the synonyms for "trainer" as teacher in Roget's Thesaurus (1977) are "handler, groomer; driller, drill-master; coach, athletic coach."

[4] For example, see John Muchmore and Kathleen Galvin, "A Report of the Task Force on Career Competencies in Oral Communication Skills for Community College Students Seeking Immediate Entry

The literature is supported by recruiters' statements: in listing criteria for new hires, recruiters uniformly place communication skills among the most important. If new hires don't have the ability to communicate, recruiters say, the organization will "train" them.[5] Typically, the "incompetent communicator" is defined in terms of skills deficiency. Typically, the solution is articulated as simply a matter of teaching the person a package of behaviors which will then, magically, make him or her a "better communicator." Performance is the concern and the focus.

The picture is slightly different, however, when one talks to those attending "training" sessions. A person in the business setting wants to know how to "communicate well" by the standards of the corporation, and he or she also wants to know how to accomplish personal and professional goals. Members of an organization face an environment which demands their participation as public communicators. They have experienced the consequences of their communication abilities, and they know there is more to it than applying a set of formulaic behaviors. They know that the situation determines the criteria by which their performance will be judged. They don't have our labels, but they know that they are dealing with rhetorical exigencies. They know there is more to it than simply behavioral skills. As one works with these individuals it becomes clear very quickly that one must be an educator, that one must answer the request of this audience for insights which will lead to greater rhetorical sophistication. In this capacity, a Speech-Communication professional must draw upon her or his knowledge about skills, but even more importantly upon knowledge about how language works, about the interaction of language with the epistemology of the organization, and about the interaction of words with the sense of self.

Thus, as educators in the corporate setting, we are dealing with the needs of two audiences. The people who hire us want their employees to be individuals who get to the point, who don't ramble, who talk "clearly," who are able to make a good

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Into the Work Force," Communication Education, 32 (1983) pp. 207-220.

[5] Recruiter statement, Hamline University, St. Paul, MN, spring 1986. All those who came to talk with faculty about hiring Liberal Arts graduates emphasized the ability to communicate orally. The organizations represented were diverse, ranging from local government to multi-national corporations. Extending this example, one can see that there are major markets for what we as Speech professionals have to offer. One of the corporations represented, for example, employs over 96,000 people world-wide and has facilities in Minnesota, Massachusetts, Florida, Colorado, Washington, California, Arizona, Belgium, France, Italy, Scotland, Hong Kong, to name just a few places.

impression for the company, who can persuade ("get the contract"), who can explain technical ideas clearly to those with differing backgrounds, who can "work with others." Managers don't want to be bored anymore and they don't want to be embarrassed anymore. Those who comprise the population to be "trained", however, have different reasons for coming to communication workshops. They, too, don't want to be boring or embarrassing (or embarrassed), but the people with whom I have worked voice far more strategic concerns: e.g., persuasion in the face of hostility, whether it's from customers, vendors, superiors, or subordinates; face-saving for self and audience when you know more than the audience but they're supposed to know more than you; self-confidence amid an apprehension producing and political situation; showing depth and breadth of knowledge in the space of a staff meeting status report; control of the speaking situation; how to deal with being placed in the untenable position of representing a position you had no part in creating and with which you do not agree--and the ethics of such a dilemma; how to be credible in an uncertain organizational environment; how to overcome the barriers to credibility of being young, or a non-native language speaker, or female, or male. Those who attend workshops want to know how to change their communication to make their work lives more livable. They want more than learning a few behavioral skills. They are also concerned about ethics, about consequences, and about the implications of being a participant in their own idiosyncratic rhetorical community.

Admittedly, as anyone who has taught communication workshops in a corporate setting will tell you, we teach students to do certain things: paraphrase, listen actively, use a thesis statement, organize one's ideas around no more than three to five main points, maintain eye contact (at least in Western cultures), don't jingle change in one's pockets. Usually students ask for a few "tips", and we to pass some along: if your knees shake, lean them against the table in front of you. The problem is not that we do so, as this is all good information, and certainly essential when teaching about communicating in the various settings within an organization. The problem is that we also have the knowledge to teach more (and we often do teach more), but we often don't recognize or acknowledge that we can and should apply our unique critical expertise in this setting. In essence, as communication educators in the organization not only should we act as very pragmatic rhetorical critics, we should teach our clients to do the same.

Any time we are teaching communication skills, we are exposing students to communication choices. When we teach skills related to presentational speaking or to interpersonal communication, we are offering choices to our students. Most of us in this room have probably talked about having as a training goal "expanding the repertoire of choices" available to our students. In addition, we work with them to assess the potential

function of their rhetorical choices, given the exigencies of their particular organizational rhetorical situation. All of us do this to some extent now, if we talk about audience analysis and adaptation at all. I'm suggesting that we focus upon this aspect of what we do. We need to recognize and articulate what we are doing as we exercise it, as we model it, and as we teach it in order to acknowledge our critical function to ourselves and to highlight it for our clients. Because our role as rhetorical critic is crucial it is important that we present ourselves in a way that captures the full essence of what we do. In presenting ourselves to our clients we need to make clear that we are providing the information and the skills practice they want, but more importantly we are providing an opportunity for participants to determine--pragmatically--the rhetorical requirements of the communication environment in which they find themselves speaking.

One reason human resource education by academics is often rejected by corporate clients is that they fear we will fail to address the real-ness of their problems. It is a well-founded fear, based upon experience. I believe the demand for skills is a result of this fear. Theoretical approaches are seen as impractical, as not applicable in the real world. Theory and practice tend to be viewed as mutually exclusive, and so we are told, "Just give me a list of things to do, so that if I do them I'll be a more effective speaker [executive, team member, manager...]" We may be asked to create courses which can be replicated by anyone, and then to "train the trainer" (who likely has no background in Speech-Communication) to teach the course. The notion is thus reinforced that what we know and what we do--that which took us a good deal of time to become experts in--can be done by most anyone if he or she only learns what the magic behavioral skills are.

Through taking a rhetorical critical posture, using their problems as our data, we give validity to the "real-ness" of their problems and to their rhetorical dilemmas. By affirming the real-ness of their strategic questions, we begin to lead workshop participants through the process of grappling with the rhetorical exigencies which are a part of those situations. We thus translate our knowledge to fit the rhetorical context of their organization and of their specific circumstances; we make our theory real by showing how it may help them address the problems <u>they</u> define. Furthermore, we make it clear that the theoretical elements of our work are not impractical nor inapplicable, and that there is more to becoming effective communicators than knowing a set of magic words or where to put one's hands.

One might ask what such a workshop or seminar looks like. First, this kind of workshop is highly participative. The more the participants bring in their own individual problems, the more they address those problems as a group, the greater the learning that will take place. Beyond the basics, which I have found <u>are</u>

necessary (e.g., I have never worked with a group in which the majority already used thesis statements, or that knew how to paraphrase), one structures the workshop so that participants address communication situations or communication dilemmas that they now face or that they think they'll have to face. They must work with their own data. For example, in teaching a presentational speaking workshop I will talk about which data to include, different patterns of organization, and factors related to delivery and nervousness. I also help participants conceptualize the rhetorical problems they face, determine ways to examine those problems, and decide upon their options strategically. They then have an opportunity, in a lab setting, to put their strategic plans into action. To help my clients do this, I must also conceptualize their rhetorical problems, and I must wrestle with trying to understand the exigencies of their rhetorical situations. There is no place for a safe abstraction like, "Remember to speak to your audience." Instead, I work with clients to identify and analyze not only their audiences but the rhetorical character of their own organization.

Second, because one must concentrate upon the clients' rhetorical environment, the critical approach to teaching workshops is intense. One gains critical insight throughout the day. The facilitator of a workshop taking this approach should plan on being exhausted by the end of the day. One is wearing one's critical hat all day, exercising one's critical insight and instincts non-stop. The data one gathers from informal interaction is important additional information to bring to conscious awareness when discussing rhetorical strategy specific to an individual's situation. As a critic, I respond to and use this information in forming my critical insights. As a teacher, I then show how this kind of information is also useful in developing communication responses. Thus, one is "on" as a critic at all times, even during breaks, even during lunch. This is particularly true when teaching interpersonal communication workshops where the normative rhetorical patterns of an organization may be more evident in analogic communications (such as story-telling) than in extended linear description.

Third, participants should be involved in analyzing not just their own situations, but those brought to the workshop by others from the same organization. By exercising their own critical abilities through responding to the rhetorical attempts of others, they gain flexibility in addressing their own rhetorical needs.

The workshop materials that I use reflect my emphasis upon participants using their own materials. Exercises, case studies, or prepared video-tapes are useful, but I've found that they are complementary to rather than being a substitute for the data participants bring from their own experiences. I make extensive use of prework to prepare individuals to work with their own data. In all my workshops, participants are asked to complete prework which focuses their attention upon their own rhetorical

environments and needs. For example, to prepare for an interpersonal communication workshop individuals are told to write an extended description of a communication situation that was, is, or that they expect will be particularly difficult for them. They are asked to write notes about the situation, the persons involved, the expectations the people involved have about the situation and each other, the intended meanings versus what was (or is likely to be) said, and so forth. In the workshop, participants then use the situation they have identified and described to develop more constructive communication responses within the context of that situation. In prework for a presentational speaking workshop participants are asked about their typical audiences, the kinds of speaking they typically do, the problems they think they encounter, why they think they are problems, and so forth. In addition, participants are told to bring materials with them typical of the kind with which they work daily. They will then use those materials to prepare a short presentation to be given and discussed in the workshop. They are encouraged to talk about the same kinds of issues and create the same kinds of contexts that they usually encounter. They also may create their own typical audience, with workshop participants taking on the appropriate roles.

Instruction of specific content works best when it addresses the rhetorical problems presented by the participants. For example, when teaching about interpersonal communication, it isn't unusual to have a lively discussion with a group about the pros and cons of "owning" statements through using "I-statements." In certain corporate environments, "I" statements are interpreted as self-centered, narcissistic, and an indication of an unwillingness to share credit. The generalized "you" is considered more appropriate, and as a discussion progresses it may become quite clear that the generalized "you" functions to spread a shared organizational perspective. It may well be an important element in the communication climate of a given organization. I may not <u>agree</u> with that type of communication climate, but if I am to deal with that rhetorical climate and if I am to help my clients deal with it, I will be more successful as critic-trying-to-understand-and-elucidate than as expert-attempting-to-impose-my-abstract-and-divorced-notions-of-"appropriate"-skills. A recent discussion regarding the use of qualifiers (in a presentational workshop) also illustrates the importance of putting our advice in context. In the organization where this discussion took place, qualified remarks are the norm in the research arm where a less-than-absolute position is highly valued. Qualified remarks in the production facility, on the other hand, are likely to be heard as lack of opinion or lack of confidence. Scientists who must move back and forth between the two facilities are thus faced with very different rhetorical requirements. The consequences of their language choices only became clear through our critical discussions which focused on their specific rhetorical contexts. The role of ambiguity in

organizations may well be yet another example. How ambiguity functions in a specific organizational context may be an important critical insight for an employee making decisions about communication behaviors in both the presentational and the interpersonal situation. As outsiders, we cannot know if ambiguity is an issue nor how it functions in a particular organization, but we can ask the questions a critic would ask if ambiguous communication presents itself.[6]

Workshop participants may show initial resistance to a highly participative workshop, or one which requires examination of their own day-to-day problems. Participants may attempt to avoid participation or deny their need: "I don't do this type of thing now, I don't have anything I can talk about," or "I won't ever have to do that." They may be reluctant to talk about their specific situations. A workshop leader may be concerned about covering too little content, or loss of control as far as workshop content agenda.[7] A workshop taking this approach doesn't make for a nice neat package to take from one place to another, beyond the basic structure. Furthermore, it is harder to represent to potential clients.

Yet, we know people learn more and they retain what they learn longer when they work out the answers to problems themselves. Once we have convinced our audience(s) that we mean it, that we will address their individual rhetorical needs in the situations <u>they</u> define, then we change the educational situation from one where we are expected to train rote skills to one where we are seen as a valuable resource for strategic understanding. We change the education situation to one where we are seen as offering a chance, in a highly pragmatic and practical way, to see what happens when one tries different rhetorical options, and a chance to understand why differing rhetorical choices function as they do.

It's our task to create a situation where we teach clients how to discover the questions to ask which will enable them to discover the alternative communication behaviors available to them. By focusing on participants' rhetorical needs and rhetorical environments, we help them apply performance skills in more flexible ways and in ways that are transferable to other situations. By becoming fledgling critics, they gain flexibility, responsiveness, and can adapt better to

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[6] See Eric M. Eisenberg, "Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication," <u>Communication Monographs</u>, 51 (1984), pp. 227-242.

[7] I also use written materials to supplement verbal presentation of content. I refer to these materials as "reference material," and frequently direct attention to relevant pages throughout a workshop. This relieves me of some of my anxiety about covering enough content, and it provides additional information for those participants seeking it.

organizational change. They are better prepared to respond to the organization as a dynamic environment. They cannot gain this flexibility without going beyond "skill-building" to becoming more rhetorically sophisticated.

Ironically, I'm simply saying here that as educators, we need to adapt to the needs of our audiences. To do so, we need to shift to a sort of "meta" level of adaptation. We need to concentrate our critical skills on what our clients' adaptation needs are. Secondly, I'm emphasizing function. By helping our clients understand the functional relationships between their communication choices and potential outcomes in their own organizational culture, we are enhancing their interpretive capabilities, increasing their awareness of alternative interpretive frameworks available to them, and creating an audience which is more rhetorically sophisticated. In this way, we increase their options for response, including those options we might consider dysfunctional, but which make interpretive and strategic sense given the rhetorical environment of the client.[a]

Finally, we must be concerned about our own credibility and the credibility of our discipline. We are judged in part by how well we adapt our communication to those we are trying to reach. Our credibility is also intricately affected by the ways in which we conceptualize and describe ourselves and our work. The ways in which we talk about our work further influences the ways in which our discipline comes to be perceived. We are educators who deal with skills, but we don't teach those skills in a vacuum. Not only do we need to recognize what we have to offer, we need to teach in the corporation in such a way as to get this message across there. Speech professionals offer those in the corporate world something beyond rote skills. We can help those in corporate environments understand how their enactment of skills is inextricably bound to their comprehension of the rhetorical environment within which they live. We offer insight and knowledge which can nurture the ability of individuals to be effectively responsive to the rhetorical needs of their organizational culture.

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[a] There is an additional consideration. By taking a critical orientation, each workshop or seminar becomes an education for the educator. We learn about the organizational culture, about its variability, its idiosyncracies, its consistencies. We become better educators because we are better able to adapt to these types of audience in the future.